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ABSTRACT

It is indeed a problem, perhaps even a crisis, that many Americans are ignorant of "The Tempest," the Civil War, the location of the Persian Gulf, the Constitution, or the chief justice of the Supreme Court. However, if conservative humanists continue to ostracize, scorn, and ignore both media studies and the media themselves, the result will not be a return to the good old days when people read Homer and listened to Bach, but an even darker veil of ignorance, fostered for economic and political purposes by the very media that some humanists do not wish to understand. The crisis rhetoric of conservatives has about it the ring of both Chicken Little and of Nero fiddling. They emphasize "cultural literacy" while overlooking actual literacy. The problem of student illiteracy is a chronic problem with a long history, rather than a crisis. But the conservatives ignore real problems that have better claim to the word "crisis" than do such conservative worries as political correctness, radical professors, and the inability of students to quote Shakespeare. Conservative critics are also concerned with free speech issues, yet would deny academic freedom to scholars who disagree with them. They ridicule humanistic inquiry into music video, television, popular music, and film, condemning media studies and the academic freedom required to conduct such studies. Conservative critics' mistaken understanding of television and its history underscores the need for more, not less, media study. If the humanities have no use for the media, the globally monopolized media are certainly not going to have any use for the humanities. (Thirty-eight notes are included.) (RS)

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TELEVISION AND THE CRISIS IN THE HUMANITIES

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Television and the Crisis in the Humanities

Comes now TV Guide complaining that "54 percent of Americans know that Judge [Joseph] Wapner runs The People's Court but only 9 percent know that Justice William Rehnquist heads the Supreme Court." Lest readers miss the point of this supposedly shocking allegation (drawn from an unidentified survey), TV Guide solemnly concludes: "That's a sad commentary on the public's legal savvy."[1]

Of course, one could look at it another way and say that it is a sad commentary on the Supreme Court. The "legal savvy" of Americans has probably increased as a result of The People's Court--more people now know that small claims court exists and is available to anyone who wants to use it. On the other hand, the Supreme Court is remote, arcane, and (as a cynic might conclude) primarily concerned with disputes among people and groups rich enough to hire lawyers to pursue the matter that far.

This is not to say that The People's Court is a masterpiece of public service, entertainment, or art. Its appeal lies not in any kind of "legal savvy," however meager, but in the judge's personality and the lurid disputes he presides over. The problem with the TV Guide article is that it illogically implies some serious deficiency in Americans' legal knowledge, which is operationally defined as familiarity with Rehnquist. Having set up this false crisis, the article pretends to blame TV (as if TV Guide ever really blames TV), but actually blames the audience. Then the article does a pseudo-about-face and says that the solution to the alleged problem is more TV, in the form of the new cable channel Court TV, which signed on July 1, 1991, with round-the-clock legal

programming, including actual courtroom proceedings from around the country (as if this will increase the percentage of Americans who can name Rehnquist, much less increase their real legal knowledge).

I begin with this example because it treats television as a site of crisis. Americans should know Rehnquist (high culture), but instead they know Wapner (low culture). The audience has failed to reach a desirable level of cultural literacy. The culprits are audience members themselves, the inferior form of television they bring about through their viewing choices, and (by implication) the educational system whose job it really is to teach people about our revered legal institutions.

In both form and function, this line of reasoning bears strong resemblance to many of the recent, well publicized exposés of American education. The Wapner-Rehnquist comparison, while a minor part of the TV Guide article, is illustrative of a type of statistic widely used to sound alarm--a certain percentage of some surveyed group does not know some fact. A quarter of college seniors cannot "distinguish between the thoughts of Karl Marx and the United States Constitution." Forty-two percent "could not place the Civil War in the correct half-century." Fifty-eight percent "did not know Shakespeare wrote The Tempest." Seventy-five percent of Americans could not locate the Persian Gulf on a map. And so forth.[2]

In a similar vein, William Bennett, then head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, used smoking-gun statistics from the American Council on Education to support his 1984 call for reform

in humanities instruction in higher education: "a student can obtain a bachelor's degree from 75 percent of all American colleges and universities without having studied European history; from 72 percent without having studied American literature or history; and from 86 percent without having studied the civilizations of classical Greece and Rome."[3] Bennett continues with numerous other statistics all in support of his thesis that humanities education is in a state of disarray.

Bennett's is only one voice in the strident chorus of conservative criticism aimed at higher education over the past several years. Other architects of the conservative critique include Allan Bloom, Dinesh D'Souza, Roger Kimball, Russell Kirk, Charles Sykes, Hilton Kramer, and current NEH head Lynne Cheney. This group is by no means monolithic, but there is enough agreement among them that we can give a fairly detailed and unproblematic account of what we might identify as the conservative position.

That position is that there is a crisis in the humanities or in liberal education (hence D'Souza's phrase "illiberal education"[4]). The principal evidence of the crisis is the various statistics, plus anecdotal evidence, about what students do not know. This student ignorance is the effect, and conservatives make a series of assumptions, largely unsupported, about what the causes are. They include: a hodgepodge curriculum; dilution of the canon of literary classics; substitution of popular culture for literature as an object of study in teaching and research; the rise of women's studies, ethnic studies, cultural studies, and other new

fields; overspecialization and triviality in research (and a concomitant neglect of teaching); and overemphasis on cultural diversity, sensitivity, and multiculturalism on campus.

Above all, the conservatives blame professors. Sykes's book ProfScam depicts the professorate as fraught with laziness, dishonesty, and selfishness. One of Bennett's main themes in To Reclaim a Legacy is that it is abandonment of the humanities by professors that has landed us in our current, sorry state.[5]

In particular, the conservatives blame radical professors for the alleged decline of the humanities. Kimball's "tenured radicals,"[6] ensconced in comfortable positions, have turned their backs on supposedly timeless and universal classics of literature in favor of a politicized curriculum. According to this view, politics (i.e., the politics of radical professors) is corrupting higher education, with results not only in curricular matters, but also in such phenomena as campus speech codes that institutionalize "political correctness" and a "new McCarthyism."[7]

What's wrong with this picture? Plenty, but in order to understand its appeal, we need to examine and acknowledge the many things the conservatives get right or almost right.

To begin with, let us admit that too many students are alarmingly ignorant when they enter college, and when they leave. A student should learn the location of the Persian Gulf in high school or earlier, along with the dates of the Civil War, who wrote The Tempest, and many other facts.

But statistics about ignorance of facts are hardly an index of the gravity of the problem university teachers face. Sykes, in a rare moment of moderation, admits that the accumulation of facts in one's brain amounts to a game of Trivial Pursuit and does not make one wise or educated.[8]

Yet the conservative position typically glosses over this point. The last one-fourth of E. D. Hirsch's book Cultural Literacy, a favorite among conservatives despite Kimball's later rebuke of Hirsch, is little more than Trivial Pursuit in book form.[9] The idea behind the book is that an educated person should know content--that is, facts. This requires rote memorization rather than the aimless "inquiry" into methods, skills, and concepts that conservatives imagine goes on in too many college classrooms.

As I said earlier, conservatives are correct to insist that students should learn facts. Where they are wrong is to emphasize this "cultural literacy" while overlooking actual literacy. The problem is not only that students do not know facts, but also that they cannot read or write.[10] As anecdotal evidence, I offer the following passage written within the past five years by a college senior in one of my classes. I use the passage with her permission. I am reproducing it, complete with mistakes, in exactly the form I received it:

> In the era we are in today, Television is doing all it could to raise controversy, since that is how the culture seems to be going. Our society is controversial

about A.I.D.S., children growing up to fast, and homosexuality. In relevance to these subjects, there are shows displaying these topics. One program from the show, The Hogan Family, Jason Bateman's best friend dies of A.I.D.S. Then of course there is the highly rated show Bart Simpson, a cartoon of an obnoxious, vulgar mouth kid admired by the younger generation. The newest controversial topic shown on television, is the Madonna video displaying homosexuality. It is not allowed to be shown on air, yet when Nightline aired aired it to show what it was like, thousands of viewers tuned in, and millions are talking about it. The idea that in today's society controversy is strong, therefore, the media tries to capture the audiences by having strong controversial topics on television.

This is by no means the worst writing a senior has ever submitted to me--in fact, it is fairly representative, and this student had actually shown some improvement after I gave her guidance and harsh grades on three earlier papers. Still, she is incoherent and close to illiterate. Elsewhere in the paper, she plagiarizes at length because she cannot write herself. Now, I can teach this student the location of the Persian Gulf, and I can even teach her how to spell it. What I cannot do is teach her in one semester how to read, write, and think. William Bennett's idea that everyone should read Huckleberry Finn is a splendid one, but

this student cannot read a newspaper article, much less a serious book.

To blame professors for problems like this misses the mark. What this student needs is prolonged tutoring in remedial reading and English grammar. Of course, she will not get it, and she probably does not want it; but these are the subject areas that are especially in crisis, and they reflect problems in elementary and secondary education. We in higher education inherit the problems and handle them as best we can.

It is not enough to suggest, as Bennett does, that "we" raise college entrance requirements in the humanities.[11] This, according to Bennett, would have a ripple effect and cause high schools to raise their graduation requirements, or at least to increase their course offerings in the humanities. This is an unusual deviation from the conservative doctrine of local control over schools and is also pie-in-the-sky. Bennett seems to have the impression that the faculty is regularly polled about what admission requirements should be. In fifteen years in higher education, I have not once seen an issue of this sort come before the faculty. I was once involved in a decision to raise admission standards in a particular degree program, and the university administration overturned it. On another occasion, the campus faculty voted to raise graduation requirements, and the administration refused to implement the decision.

Admission and graduation requirements at all levels are very much subject to the whims of politicians and administrators. These

whims lean strongly in the direction of vocational and professional training--for example, in June 1991 the Illinois legislature passed the Illinois Cooperative Work Study Program Act, which will (if signed by the Governor) promote and provide funding for cooperative education at the university level. This is a curricular matter, yet the faculty has nothing to do with it. If enacted, the new program, although probably well-intentioned, will certainly not have a positive impact on the humanities. It will, instead, increase the already overwhelming predominance of business and vocational concerns in student life.[12]

Bennett's conservatism will not allow him to venture into anything resembling a criticism of the business ethic. On the contrary: "To study the humanities in no way detracts from the career interests of students. Properly taught, they will enrich all."[13] Again the problem is professors, who are not teaching properly. Further:

> Conventional wisdom attributes the steep drop in the number of students who major in the humanities to a concern for finding good-paying jobs after college. Although there is some truth in this, we believe that there is another, equally important reason--namely, that we in the academy have failed to bring the humanities to life and to insist on their value. From 1970 to 1982 the number of bachelor's degrees awarded in all fields <u>increased</u> by 11 percent from 846,110 to 952,998. But during the same period, degrees in English <u>dropped</u> not by

> a few percentage points, but by 57 percent, in philosophy by 41 percent, in history by 62 percent, and in modern languages by 50 percent.[14]

Let us apply a little good, old-fashioned humanistic logic to this paragraph. The uncredited statistics are quite scientific-sounding, but they do not prove what Bennett would like us to think they prove, which is that there is anything wrong with "conventional wisdom" about job-hunting. The statistics certainly do not support Bennett's assertion that "we in the academy have failed to bring the humanities to life and to insist on their value."

Who is "we"? Not Bennett, who gave up teaching to become an administrator and bureaucrat. Not Cheney, who left teaching to become a journalist and bureaucrat. Not Kimball, D'Souza, or Kramer, who are probably best described as gadflies with ties to conservative periodicals, foundations, and think-tanks.[15] Not Sykes, whose father was a professor but who is not a teacher himself.

These "untenured conservatives" have great reverence for Homer and Dante, but little respect for the teacher in the trenches, who must try to "bring the humanities to life," as Bennett puts it, in mass lectures to unruly crowds of poorly prepared and uninterested students. The students then grade the teacher, through evaluation-of-instruction forms, which help to determine whether the teacher will receive a 1% raise or a 1.5% raise. Low raises, poor pay and working conditions, deteriorating facilities, budget cuts, crowded

classrooms, exploitation of teaching assistants and part-time faculty, low morale, and an anticipated severe shortage of qualified humanities faculty[16]--these are crises from the teacher's point of view, yet the conservatives have practically nothing to say about these issues. Similarly, from the student's perspective, the crisis lies primarily in such matters as high cost; declining availability of financial aid; balancing school, family, and career demands; and closed and canceled classes. On these matters, too, the conservatives are silent.[17]

In fact, the crisis rhetoric of conservatives has about it the ring both of Chicken Little and of Nero fiddling. Chicken Little, because life goes on at the university with very little day-to-day evidence of the sort of crisis the conservatives have announced. Students are disgracefully illiterate, but they were equally illiterate in 1975 when I started teaching, so what we have appears to me to be more a chronic problem than a crisis. Moreover, the idea of crisis is itself chronic--we can trace it back through Philip Coombs's World Crisis in Education (1985), the "Literacy Crisis" of the 1970s, Charles Silberman's Crisis in the Classroom (1970), Christopher Dawson's Crisis of Western Education (1961), Bernard Iddings Bell's Crisis in Education (1949), Walter Moberly's Crisis in the University (1949), and numerous other alarmist tracts. Here is how Jacques Barzun described recent college graduates in 1959:

> . . . young men and women [who have] no knowledge that is precise and firm, no ability to do intellectual work with

> thoroughness and despatch. Though here are college graduates, many of them cannot read accurately or write clearly, cannot do fractions or percentages without travail and doubt, cannot utter their thoughts with fluency or force, can rarely show a handwriting that would pass for adult, let alone legible, cannot trust themselves to use the foreign language they have studied for eight years, and can no more range conversationally over a modest gamut of intellectual topics than they can address their peers consecutively on one of the subjects they have studied.[18]

The more things change, the more they remain the same.

The conservatives also resemble Nero fiddling because, as I have noted, they ignore real problems that have better claim to the word "crisis" than do such conservative worries as political correctness, radical professors, and the inability of students to quote Shakespeare. In addition, the left has a perspective of its own about a crisis in the humanities. As Patrick Brantlinger describes it, "[t]he conservative myth that 'theory'--structuralism, deconstruction, Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, and so on--has <u>caused</u> the crisis in the humanities needs to be turned around: theory is a response to crisis, not its cause."[19] Viewed in this way, crisis is the discovery of illegitimate authority. There are many dimensions of crisis, including economic crisis, political crisis, and failures of institutions to serve their ostensible functions and to provide for the needs of the

population. These crises and failures impinge on the humanities as intellectual dilemmas and clashes.[20]

It is at this intellectual level, rather than at the more mundane level of teachers' and students' concerns, that the conservatives concentrate their attack. In "The Real Crisis in the Humanities," the concluding chapter in Tenured Radicals, Kimball focuses entirely on a 1989 Williams College panel discussion called "Crisis in the Humanities?". This particular conference, or any such conference, is so far removed from the everyday experiences of most humanities teachers and students that it seems a very unlikely setting for a crisis. But in Kimball's eyes it epitomizes a widespread intellectual subterfuge:

> Here we had the most traditional of academic ceremonies, replete with academic regalia and communal singing of "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," providing the setting for a speech whose essential point was that the humanities can cut themselves off from both their foundation and their ideals and still be said to be thriving. What else are we to make of . . . the contemptuous reference to "the sanctity of the so-called canon"? Or the suggestion that "the referentiality of language" is something the humanities today could just as well do without? Or the idea that "new methods"--meaning deconstruction and its progeny--and new "subjects of inquiry"--meaning everything from pulp novels to rock videos--are fit subjects for humanistic inquiry?[21]

Recently conservative critics have been quite concerned with free speech issues--especially speech codes, political correctness, and instances in which conservatives have allegedly been punished for expressing their views. Here again I believe we should concede that the conservatives are correct to insist upon free speech. The problem is that, at least in one respect, they do not reciprocate. I refer particularly to Kimball's castigation of new methods and new subjects of inquiry. According to Kimball, the methods and subjects he disapproves of are not "fit subjects for humanistic inquiry." In making this assertion, he is seeking to deny the right of academic freedom to scholars who disagree with him. What is at stake in such a denial is not only the academic freedom of individuals, but also the very idea of a university as a place to study the universe. Kimball's position is also logically inconsistent into that by objecting to humanistic inquiry into rock videos, for example, he is himself, as a humanist, making a statement about rock videos. He would deny to others the right to study rock video, while reserving for himself the right to comment both about it and about anybody else's researches about it.

As someone who has conducted humanistic inquiry into music video, television, popular music, film, and other subjects Kimball despises, I object to his attempt to restrict what I am able to say and write. He has every right to disagree with any scholar's findings about music video or some other popular culture topic, but this is not his usual tactic. What he prefers to do is ridicule the subject matter so that it becomes unnecessary to make a

substantive engagement with the author. It is not that he disagrees with something I have said in one of my studies--since the subject is unfit, the study ipso facto has no value and no right to exist. As Kimball says, quoting Nietzsche: "[W]e do not refute a disease. We resist it."[22] This tidy analogy, grounded in unreason and an inflammatory use of the word "disease," overlooks the fact that in order to resist a disease, it is helpful to research it and understand it.

The condemnation of media studies (and much else) is obviously an attempt to violate academic freedom, and therefore free speech, which the conservatives claim to support.[23] Sykes finesses this inconvenient fact by latching onto half of the American Association of University Professors' "Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure," while ignoring the other half: "The AAUP drew a careful distinction between freedom of research, which was entitled to 'full freedom,' and classroom teaching, which required professional restraint."[24] Having noted this careful distinction, Sykes proceeds to ignore it. Despite the efforts of Accuracy in Academia, it is still difficult for conservatives to document lack of professional restraint in the classrooms of radical professors. Consequently, Sykes and Kimball focus instead on incoherent curricula, silly course titles, and what they consider absurd and politically irresponsible research projects. Their critiques of the titles of courses, conference papers, and articles are usually amusing, and when they offer substantive analyses of the contents of recent scholarship, their points are often well taken. But this

does not excuse or justify the conservatives' true goal, which is to prevent research that does not conform to conservative ideas about proper subject matter, methods, and political outlook. Naturally, conservatives want their agenda upheld in the classroom and curriculum as well, but their critique of research should be seen for what it is. It is not an appeal for greater professional restraint by teachers. Rather, it is an attack against the full academic freedom claimed by AAUP for researchers.

Media studies and popular culture are particularly objectionable academic pursuits, in the eyes of conservatives. One of Kimball's most virulent attacks is against E. Ann Kaplan for her book Rocking Around the Clock, which is a study of MTV and music video.[25] Kimball does not demonstrate, or even state, that music video is bad--he assumes it. He does not allow for the possibility that some videos may be good, or even that the entire corpus of music video may, somewhere, contain something of value. Nor does he entertain the possibility that, despite its aesthetic inferiority, there is any value whatsoever in studying music video, or that some other music video scholarship besides Kaplan's might be worth looking at.

In his guerrilla-style critique of Kaplan, Kimball follows a pattern, also used by Sykes throughout ProfScam.[26] The pattern is this: Focus on the topic of research rather than on what the research says about the topic. In selecting research to ridicule, choose topics that can easily be portrayed as trivial (music video, TV commercials, everyday conversation, TV series, potholders,

cheerleading) or sensational (masturbation, rape, phallic symbolism). Ridicule the title and subject of the study (or of a course in a college catalogue). And, sometimes, quote a few passages and make fun of them. The more ridiculous the passages, the better--and often they are quite ridiculous, especially when taken out of context. Interestingly, TV Guide was one of the pioneers of this technique in a 1988 article that poked fun at academic analyses of television.[27] It seems that anyone who wants to study television seriously needs to be prepared to withstand refutation-by-one-liner in books and magazines that reach millions of readers.

Kaplan was an attractive target for such an attack, both because of her prominent position in the humanities[28] and because of various flaws in her book. The passages selected for ridicule by Kimball use equivocation, jargon, and passive verbs to such an extent that Kaplan's meaning is often quite unclear. There is no point in trying to defend Kaplan against Kimball's substantive comments, because the comments are essentially correct. Those of us who write about popular culture should note these problems and try to avoid them in our own writing.

At the same time, we should reject Kimball's unwarranted position that music video is unworthy as an object of study. We should object not only to the position, but to the fact that Kimball arrives at it without logical argument (and in fact does so, erroneously, in the name of reason). His implied reasoning is that Kaplan's study is worthless, therefore the study of music

video is worthless. In rejecting the study of music video, Kimball is refusing to take seriously the people who create videos, the people who watch them, and the people who study them. This is anti-democratic and irresponsible, not to mention mean-spirited in the case of the attack on Kaplan.

There are good videos, good studies of music video, and viewers who exercise aesthetic judgment in watching videos. That is not to say that music video should be part of the core curriculum at universities, or fulfill general education requirements. Music video is not part of the literary canon, nor should it be, not is anyone saying it should be. But it is part of the humanities, and it should be studied by humanists and taught in specialized courses at universities, just as we study and teach obscure painters, writers, philosophers, theologians, composers, and even the obscure filmmakers whose work has inspired music video directors.

Of course, anyone who believes that music video is now one of the most-studied subjects in the humanities is wildly mistaken. On the contrary, it has received very little serious study, and outlets for publication are extremely limited--so, again, Kimball is Chicken Little. But even a few studies of music video are too many for the conservatives. In the conservative view, there is such a thing as a corrupting "media culture," which universities should exclude and combat.

New Criterion editor Hilton Kramer makes the point in conference proceedings published in Partisan Review:

> [O]ur subject today is the impact of the media on the university. We know that the impact of the media as it now exists on the university has been a corrupting impact. We know that a good deal of what university teaching has to contend with is this culture of simplifications, caricatures and lies that students bring with them to the university, as if they were bringing a state of nature. For more and more students find it impossible to distinguish between media culture and outside life, what might be called "real life," because there has been so little, in their education and in their upbringing before coming to the university, that encouraged them to make the requisite distinction between culture and life itself. Such distinctions are lacking not only in the students, who are in many respects the involuntary victims of the media culture, but also in the faculty and the administration, who are more and more inclined to countenance and indeed initiate the substitution of media artifacts, media studies, media propaganda for the traditional objects of study. Indeed, they have allowed media culture to supplant humanistic culture as the basic standard of discussion.[29]

Leaving aside the question of proof, which is so often absent in conservative polemics, we find again, at the heart of the argument, the conservative distaste for media studies. Elsewhere in his remarks, Kramer makes it clear that newspapers and magazines

are included in what he means by "the media"--so, in the end, apparently it is only permissible to study books (the Great Books, of course), live performing arts, and museum art. In case his position is not clear enough in the preceding passage, we may refer to an article in New Criterion in which Kramer states that "all forms of popular culture should be banned from courses in the arts and the humanities." This includes films, "either as objects of study or as aids to study."[30] It is safe to assume that Kramer would include television in his ban, since it is, of course, "media culture," which consists of "simplifications, caricatures and lies" (in Kramer's own simplification and caricature).

What is the "requisite distinction between culture and life itself"? Indeed, what is "life itself," and by what authority does Kramer claim to know? Kramer's life is, no doubt, quite different from that of the average student or faculty member. What is "humanistic culture," and how is it so different from "media culture," and how are these related to the "culture" that students cannot distinguish from "life itself"? Kramer does not say, but later in his remarks he provides a clue that suggests a possible interpretation of the "distinction between culture and life itself."

In a response to a "point about the ideological character of television being the result of an economically determined program," Kramer says:

> Yes, in some general way that's true. Television is a business and it's in business to make a profit. But that

> doesn't really address the question of what shapes its ideological content and why, from one period to another. After all, the television networks in the fifties were just as concerned with making a profit as they are in 1990, but the shift from what might loosely be called "family values" to what might loosely be called "uncontingent self-fulfillment" which dominates television today--that is, the shift to an emphasis on total autonomy of self--this is not economically determined. That's determined by the political and cultural values television shares with the elite culture of the moment--what I call the intellectual academic elite culture.[31]

It is difficult to imagine a more ill-informed view of television. First, it is not categorically true that television is a profit-oriented business enterprise. PBS is not. The BBC is not. Video art is not. Public access is not. Religious TV stations such as KNLC, St. Louis, are not. To ignore the variety of television is a grave intellectual error.

Second, it is nevertheless true that the type of TV that <u>is</u> in business to make a profit (i.e., commercial TV) is more responsive to the "economically determined program" of capitalism than to any other force in society. Todd Gitlin's <u>Inside Prime Time</u>, the most thorough recent study of the American TV industry, demonstrates this convincingly.[32] This point is so undeniable that Kramer must

admit it "in some general way" before moving on to his own muddled explanation.

Third, Kramer's characterization of the ideological content of both 1950s and 1990 TV is simplistic and naive, at best. There is also a logical inconsistency in his implicit nostalgia for 1950s TV, both because 1950s TV was part of "media culture" then, and because it still is, in the form of reruns.

Fourth, even if Kramer were right in his summary view of the change in TV's ideological content from the 1950s to 1990, he would still be wrong about the cause of change. That cause is primarily economic, rooted in the economic interests of advertisers, networks, stations, and other participants in the industry. For verification of that, one needs only to look at any good book on the history of television. A particularly instructive source is The Sponsor, written by Erik Barnouw, the foremost historian of American broadcasting.[33]

Fifth, Kramer's sentence about "the intellectual academic elite culture" seems to reverse his earlier position. In the previously quoted passage from Partisan Review, Kramer refers to the corrupting impact of "media culture" on the university. Now he blames the "political and cultural values" of "the intellectual academic elite culture" (presumably the university) for the shortcomings of television. It appears he would like to have it both ways, and perhaps his position actually is that there is a reciprocal influence--but a more plausible interpretation is that he will resort to any logical contortion necessary to keep from

criticizing the commercial, "free" (and conservative) system of television. To a conservative, this system is desirable because it supports capitalism as we know it, but its content is "media culture" that must be kept out of the university and separate from "real life."

Kramer's mistaken understanding of television underscores the need for more, not less, media studies. Otherwise, how will we know the history of television? How will we have the knowledge to make intelligent responses to nonsensical polemics? (The Partisan Review panel participants clearly did not have sufficient knowledge.) Especially, how will we be able to evaluate, sensibly, the true contribution of television and other media to the humanities? Rather than exclude media studies, and the media themselves, from the humanities, we should include them wholeheartedly, which, conservative fears notwithstanding, has still not been done.

It is irresponsible to prate about "media culture" as if nothing worthwhile has ever appeared, or could ever appear, on television. Such a position is inconsistent with what the humanities stand for. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the humanities as "[l]earning or literature concerned with human culture."[34] This definition certainly encompasses television, which is human culture, and media studies, which is learning and literature concerned with it.

If it still seems unnatural to think of television as part of the humanities, it is because of deficiencies not only in

television itself, but also in our understanding of it and our aspirations for it.

At the 1939 New York World's Fair demonstration of television, RCA President David Sarnoff said:

> Now we add sight to sound. It is with a feeling of humbleness that I come to this moment of announcing the birth, in this country, of a new art so important in its implication that it is bound to affect all society. It is an art which shines like a torch in the troubled world.[35]

Today, not even an NBC executive would claim that television is a torch for the troubled world. It could have been, and it could still be, but it is not. If this is not a crisis in the humanities, it is at least a tragedy.

In his book Theory of the Film, Béla Balázs said:

> [A]bout fifty . . . years ago a completely new art [film] was born. Did the academies set up research groups? Did they observe, hour by hour and keeping precise records, how this embryo developed and in its development revealed the laws governing its vital process?
>
> The scholars and academies let this opportunity pass, although for many centuries it was the first chance to observe, with the naked eye so to speak, one of the rarest phenomena of the history of culture: the emergence of a new form of artistic expression, the only one born in our time . . .[36]

We have duplicated this mistake with television, and if the conservatives have their way we will continue to do so. If this is not a crisis in the humanities, it is at least a scholarly oversight from which future generations, if not we ourselves, will suffer.

In his book The Media Monopoly, Ben Bagdikian demonstrates that "despite more than 25,000 outlets in the United States, twenty-three corporations control most of the business in daily newspapers, magazines, television, books, and motion pictures."[37] Five or six giant corporations dominate mass communication internationally (these include Rupert Murdoch's arch-conservative News Corporation Ltd., which owns TV Guide).[38] The largest media companies are increasing their integration and market shares at a rapid rate, with alarming effects on media content. If this is not a crisis in the humanities, it soon will be.

Meanwhile, it is indeed a problem, perhaps even a crisis, that many Americans are ignorant of The Tempest, the Civil War, the Persian Gulf, the Constitution, and Justice Rehnquist. But if humanists continue to ostracize, scorn, and ignore both media studies and the media themselves, the result will not be a return to the good old days when people read Homer and listened to Bach, but an even darker veil of ignorance, fostered for economic and political purposes by the very media that some humanists do not wish to understand. If the humanities have no use for the media, the globally monopolized media are certainly not going to have any

use for the humanities--and it is the humanities, and culture itself, that will suffer the most in the ensuing Dark Age.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Neil Hickey, "Can TV Do Justice to Real-Life Courtroom Dramas?", TV Guide, June 29, 1991, 8-9, quote on 9.

[2]First three statistics: Charles J. Sykes, The Hollow Men: Politics and Corruption in Higher Education (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1990), 14. Sykes is somewhat inaccurately citing Lynne V. Cheney, 50 Hours: A Core Curriculum for College Students (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1989). Cheney, in turn (p. 11), cites A Survey of College Seniors: Knowledge of History and Literature, conducted for the National Endowment for the Humanities (Princeton, NJ: Gallup Organization, 1989), 33-56. Persian Gulf statistic: National Geographic Society/Gallup survey, reported in Philip Dine, "Geography Ignorance 'Shocking,'" St. Louis Post-Dispatch, July 31, 1988, 1A, 9A. As of 1991, the latter survey is being used in direct mail solicitations to sell the National Geographic Society book Exploring Your World: The Adventure of Geography.

[3]William J. Bennett, To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1984), 13.

[4]Dinesh D'Souza, Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus (New York: Free Press, 1991).

[5]Charles J. Sykes, ProfScam: Professors and the Demise of

Higher Education (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1988); and Bennett, To Reclaim a Legacy, 15-17.

[6]Roger Kimball, Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education, paperback ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1990).

[7]For a summary, see Laura Fraser, "The Tyranny of the Media Correct: The Assault on 'the New McCarthyism,'" Extra!, May/June 1991, 6-8. On the politics-corruption connection, note the subtitles of Kimball's Tenured Radicals and Sykes's The Hollow Men.

[8]Sykes, The Hollow Men, 14. See also Michael C. Berthold, "Jeopardy!, Cultural Literacy, and the Discourse of Trivia," Journal of American Culture 13, no. 1 (Spring 1990), 11-17.

[9]E. D. Hirsch, Jr., Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). The follow-up volume is entirely in the Trivial Pursuit mode (E.D. Hirsch, Jr., Joseph F. Kett, and James Trefil, The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988]). For Kimball's criticism of Hirsch, see Tenured Radicals, 7-10, 172-74.

[10]On the dimensions of this problem, see Jonathan Kozol, Illiterate America (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1985).

[11]Bennett, To Reclaim a Legacy, 21-22.

[12]For an account of the intellectual decline brought about by the policy of "career education" (former Education Commissioner Sidney Marland's euphemism for vocational education), see Ira Shor, Culture Wars: School and Society in the Conservative Restoration 1969-1984 (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), esp. 30-58.

[13]Bennett, To Reclaim a Legacy, 15.

[14]Ibid., 13-14.

[15]See Kimball, Tenured Radicals, ix; and D'Souza, Illiberal Education, ix. See also George Lipsitz, "Listening to Learn and Learning to Listen: Popular Culture, Cultural Theory, and American Studies," American Quarterly 42 (December 1990), 615-36, esp. 632, 636; Lawrence Soley, "Right Thinking Conservative Think Tanks," Dissent 38 (Summer 1991), 418-20; and Jon Wiener, "The Olin Money Tree: Dollars for Neocon Scholars," Nation, January 1, 1990, 12-14. Kramer is editor of the conservative journal New Criterion. Kimball is managing editor.

[16]"The Academic Labor Market: A Look Into the 1990s," University Affairs, June-July 1990, 3-4.

[17]On the Reagan administration's role in financial aid cutbacks, see Svi Shapiro, Between Capitalism and Democracy: Educational Policy and the Crisis of the Welfare State (New York: Bergin & Garvey, 1990), 117.

[18]Jacques Barzun, The House of Intellect (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 98-99. Barzun is an excellent source on the history of "Intellect" and the lack thereof, through the late 1950s. A good history of the more recent "crises" in education is Shor, Culture Wars. The other books mentioned are Philip H. Coombs, The World Crisis in Education: The View from the Eighties (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Charles E. Silberman, Crisis in the Classroom: The Remaking of American Education (New York: Random House, 1970); Christopher Dawson, The Crisis of Western Education (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961); Bernard Iddings Bell, Crisis in Education: A Challenge to American Complacency (New York: Whittlesey House, 1949); and Walter Moberly, The Crisis in the University (London: SCM Press, 1949).

[19]Patrick Brantlinger, Crusoe's Footprints: Cultural Studies in Britain and America (New York: Routledge, 1990), 10.

[20]See ibid., 1-33.

[21]Kimball, Tenured Radicals, 187-88.

[22]Ibid., 204.

[23]To an extent, the conservatives' concentration upon free-speech issues appears to be part of a larger plan--an organized, carefully conceived campaign to "attempt to steal [the] high ground away from the left." See Sara Diamond, "Readin', Writin' and Repressin'," Z Magazine, February 1991, 45-48, quote on 46.

[24]Sykes, The Hollow Men, 34.

[25]E. Ann Kaplan, Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism, and Consumer Culture (New York: Methuen, 1987); Kimball, Tenured Radicals, 42-45.

[26]See especially chapters 6 and 7 in Sykes, ProfScam, 101-14. Sykes also criticizes a music video course at California State University, Los Angeles (ProfScam, 81).

[27]Merrill Panitt, "If Tom Selleck Is a 'Libidinal Spectacle' . . . Then Miami Vice Is a 'Confluence of Commodities,'" TV Guide, November 5, 1988, 13-14.

[28]Kaplan, a well known film scholar, is professor of English and director of the Humanities Institute at the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

[29]Hilton Kramer, remarks in "The Impact of the Media," panel discussion proceedings, Partisan Review 58 (Spring 1991), 227-48, quote on 229-30.

[30]Hilton Kramer, "Studying the Arts and the Humanities: What Can Be Done," New Criterion, February 1989, 1-6, quotes on 4.

[31]Kramer, "Impact of the Media," 233-34.

[32]Todd Gitlin, Inside Prime Time (New York, Pantheon, 1983).

[33]Erik Barnouw, The Sponsor: Notes on a Modern Potentate (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

[34]The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), vol. 7, 476. The definition actually appears under the singular form, "humanity."

[35]David Sarnoff, quoted in Harry Castleman and Walter J. Podrazik, Watching TV: Four Decades of American Television (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), 10.

[36]Béla Balázs, Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art, trans. Edith Bone (New York: Dover Publications, 1970), 22.

[37]Ben H. Bagdikian, The Media Monopoly, 3rd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 4. See also Ben H. Bagdikian, "Cornering Hearts and Minds: The Lords of the Global Village," Nation, June 12, 1989, 805-20.

[38]Upon buying TV Guide in 1988, Murdoch declared the magazine "too cerebral" and promptly steered it to new depths of fatuousness, lowering the level of public discourse about television to an all-time nadir. See Katharine Seelye, "TV Guide: The Shake-Up," Columbia Journalism Review, November/December 1989, 41-45.